

Lessons from Educational Reform in Germany: One School May Not Fit All

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Abstract

This article describes and analyzes the debate about inclusion against the backdrop of school reform in Germany. The tiered school system has caused significant controversies during the past decades and underwent changes that often yielded ambiguous results with regards to social and educational justice. Another major change of the system is now demanded by proponents of full inclusion, using the United Nations 'Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' (UN CRPD) as moral and legal justification. However, the very high hopes aroused by the envisaged systemic overhaul may result in disappointment. Educating *all* children with and without disabilities together in a “school for all” may not be the best way to achieve social justice. There are other, more significant factors contributing to this quest than the structure of a school system. Different structures make it possible that every child receives the learning and developmental conditions which she needs.

Key Words: UN CRPD, Full Inclusion, Special Education, School Reform, Tiered School System

The education of students with and without special needs in the same classroom has been a controversial topic for decades in special education in Germany and elsewhere. The problems that occur with implementing inclusion are similar in many countries with different underlying conditions (Anastasiou, Gregory, & Kauffman, in press). Educational traditions and previous school structures play only a minor role (Anastasiou, Kauffman, & Di Nuovo, 2015). The problem areas follow their own internal logic, which seems to be quite persuasive but is flawed (Imray, & Colley, 2017). The high ideals that are connected with an inclusive change of direction have proven to be difficult to implement in reality. The Convention on the Rights of

Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations, 2006), which was ratified by Germany in 2009, contributed to an increase in intensity of the inclusion debate, and discussions of the topic of school inclusion in Germany was instrumental in moving more and more children with special needs into the regular education classroom.

Discussions about inclusion, particularly educational inclusion, are highly emotionally charged, and the expectations connected with inclusion are quite high. Proponents of full inclusion envision a new age of education that dismisses traditional expectations of schooling (Brodkorb, 2012, 2014). Prominent representatives from relevant

academic disciplines demand that in education, attention should be focused now almost exclusively on the individuality of the student in a regular education context. Social expectations regarding specific developmental or educational goals should thus be rejected (Prengel, 2013; Sander, 2005; Wocken, 2015).

In order to achieve this goal, a 'school for all' is envisioned, which does not allow any external differentiation and in which the students learn based on their own standards. In a 'One School for All', children should be prepared for life in a new 'inclusive' world. The rhetoric of inclusion is quite influential in Germany. It is often accompanied by a claim of moral superiority that is frequently immune to and highly critical of any skepticism (Schumann, 2018).

However, the call for full inclusion in the name of human rights should be examined with great care. In the case of Germany, it can be shown that many institutional reforms and educational changes have produced ambiguous results. Besides advantages, risks and unintended side effects of a policy may occur only later (Ahrbeck, 2017, 2018). This may also be true of the call for full inclusion of children with disabilities into regular education. The demand for a 'school for all' is also quite controversial because Germany has a 'tiered' educational system, although its tiers are not the same as those in the American multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). The advantages and risks with respect to educational reforms, particularly with regard to inclusion, are analysed here.

First, we provide an overview of the development of the German educational system, showing that it is firmly rooted in national history and culture. This is followed by a brief analysis of the tiered school system, with particular emphasis on its reforms and their outcome. This analysis lays the foundation for examination of the full inclusion in German education, followed by concluding comments.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN GERMANY

Intense discussion about school structure and the school system has been going on for decades in Germany. Controversy particularly surrounds the three-tiered school system, which critics claim to be socially and educationally unjust and which, in their opinion, solidifies the social and economic class structure and greatly discriminates against children and youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Hurrelmann, 2012).

Development of the Tiered System

The general education system in Germany was developed in the 18th century, with two tiers: one for the ordinary working people (now *Hauptschule*, basic education), and one for the mostly male offspring of the noble, wealthy and educational elite (now *Gymnasium*, originally also including the primary grades).

Towards the middle of the 19th century, the *Realschule* was added, taking a middle position and preparing students for positions not requiring University training, but more than basic education and catering to workers (e.g., future clerks or tradespeople). Since then, a three-tiered school system has existed in Germany (Tillmann, 2012).

After the end of the monarchy in 1918, the workers' movement and the Social Democrats aimed at ending the division in the school system and fought for a unified school for all children. Significant resistance to those plans by the educated middle and upper classes was encountered. However, in 1920, separate elementary schooling was abolished: now, a *Grundschule* for all, an elementary school (1st to 4th grade) for all children, was established. The same year, transition regulations were established to channel children at the end of 4th grade into the different schools of the tiered system, officially according to their academic achievement. This type of school (*Grundschule* or elementary school) remains today the closest to a 'school for all' children in Germany. Children with special educational needs, however, were educated in special schools (Tillmann, 2012).

In 1945, after World War II, the tiered German system was maintained in the western occupation zones, clearly against the will of the Military Administration. Thus, West Germany kept, in contrast to many other European nations, the three-tiered structure of secondary schools well into the 1990s (Hurrelmann, 2012). To this day, the three types of secondary schools (*Hauptschule*, *Realschule* and *Gymnasium*) lead to different diplomas. *Hauptschule* runs from grades 5th-9th or 10th; a *Realschule* from grades 5th- 10th, and a *Gymnasium* from grades 5th -12th or 13th. Traditionally—and, for a long time, culturally accepted—only one school path, the *Gymnasium*, granted the *Abitur* diploma after grade 12th or 13th, which conveys the right to university admission. Special needs schools can, depending on the type of special needs, start at the elementary level. Some children attend a special elementary school, whereas other children (especially in recent years) attend a special school from 5th-10th grades. Some special schools serve only the elementary grades, and students move into regular secondary schools after that. Depending on the type of special education school, all diplomas of the other secondary schools can be awarded with the exception of the *Abitur* (students would have to continue their education at a *Gymnasium*, for example). Students attending special schools who do not achieve a regular diploma receive a so-called Special School Diploma (Deutscher Bildungsserver, 2017).

Even though the curriculum in each of the school types is different in goals, scope, sequence, and level of abstraction, students have the opportunity to move between school types, depending on their scholastic

achievement during their secondary schooling. All diplomas enable students to continue their education in apprenticeship programs, which are very well developed and provide both training on the job and formal schooling. All diplomas also enable students to further their education in other school types (Germany has several schooling options for students after grade 10; students may continue their education in a more specialized way even if they do not attend a *Gymnasium*). These options cannot be described in detail here. For students with special needs who receive a 'Special School diploma', a variety of options are available, ranging from regular or modified apprenticeship programs to furthering their education in other school programs (some attached to sheltered workshop) or working towards a higher school diploma (Deutscher Bildungsserver, 2017).

It is important to note, that this tiered system of schooling is different from, for example, the tiers in RTI (Response to Intervention) in the U.S. or other tiered intervention systems, such as MTSS. In those systems, students with different achievement levels may attend one school or one classroom, and tiered interventions are based on their varied responses to general instruction (Ahrbeck, 2017; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2018). Classrooms in that system consist of heterogeneous learners. In Germany, the 3-tiered school system separates students based on their school achievement in elementary school (they go to different secondary schools after 4th grade) (Deutscher Bildungsserver, 2017). One idea behind this is that greater homogeneity of learners best serves students' academic needs. Reforms of this system are highly controversial (Hurrelmann, 2012). Proponents want a unified, comprehensive school, beginning at the secondary level. Opponents, on the other hand, see the three-tiered system as a proven and effective way to prepare young people for the labor market and university (Hurrelmann, 2012).

Developments in the 1960s: Comprehensive Schools

In Germany, education is under the jurisdiction of the Federal States (*Bundesländer*, 16 states, since reunification in 1990). The *Bundesländer* have many different educational policies, depending on the political preferences of the current governing party. In the German states ruled by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the 1960s, *Gesamtschulen*, comprehensive schools, were founded. They then existed in addition to the three-tiered system. There was no political consensus to abolish the latter (Hurrelmann, 2012). Thus, in effect, the system was converted into a four-tiered structure. The *Gesamtschule* offered three different graduation diplomas equivalent to those offered by the schools of the three-tiered system. In states governed by the Christian Democratic Party (CDU/

CSU) the traditional three-tiered system alone prevailed (Hurrelmann, 2012).

In all German states, special education schools (different types of schools for different types of special needs)—often called the 4th or even 5th tier—continued to exist (Hurrelmann, 2012). They are differentiated in seven to 10 different school types.

However, during the last decades, the ideological debate has lost intensity due to more empirical evidence, economic necessities, and demographic changes (Hurrelmann, 2012). In addition to political preference, the system has been forced to adapt to changing student numbers. Germany now has, in fact (under different names and types in the various Federal States), a two-tiered system, with both types (*Gymnasium* and the other secondary schools similar to the *Gesamtschule*) offering most diplomas, including the *Abitur*, as a university entrance examination. The only exception is Bavaria, which maintains an intact three-tier system. A two-tier system is seen as the most realistic and pragmatic alternative by many because, in their opinion, it loosens the connection between school success and social background. The *Gymnasium*, which is the most esteemed school type in Germany, successfully defended its position through all those changes (Tillman, 2012). The transition to a two-tier system does not necessarily mean the closing of special schools for children with disabilities. The various German states have very different opinions on this matter. The praxis varies extensively (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2016).

THE TIERED SCHOOL SYSTEM—CONTROVERSY AND EVIDENCE

Tiered systems in German education are often said to work against social justice and educational equity (Hurrelmann, 2012). Indeed, the claim that the German school system is fundamentally unjust in all its variations is repeatedly expressed (Deppe-Wolfinger, 2006; Helbig, & Nikolai, 2008; Reich, 2008; Seitz, Finnen, Korff, & Scheidt, 2012). This criticism was emphasized by Vernor Muñoz, the United Nations special envoy for the right to education. After a 10-day inspection tour, he demanded that Germany establish an effective school system free of discrimination. In particular, immigrant children and children with disabilities are, according to his judgement, subject to discrimination (Muñoz, 2007).

The harsh criticism directed at the seemingly unjust school system is not shared by all researchers. On one hand, this criticism is based on research results from investigations that were done quite a while ago. Other research results, to be presented here, are often not even considered. On the other hand, the significance of institutional factors (i.e. the structure of a school system) is overstated (Brenner, 2010; Kraus, 2008).

Evidence Related to School Structure and Educational Equity

The early channeling of students into different tracks and schools can be considered as detrimental to their educational development. Such channeling is viewed as an instrument of a selected societal group seeking to maintain its privileges (Hurrelmann, 2012). Others, however, see in the German tiered system an approach to offering each child optimal conditions for development by way of matching individual learning prerequisites with the learning environment. Heller does not see that early differentiation or separation of students (after 4th grade in most German states) conflicts with educational justice or achievement opportunity (Heller, 2012). Quite to the contrary, he states that it guarantees that children are not pushed too much or too little.

According to some empirical studies, a longer period of common learning does not necessarily produce better learning outcomes (Kerstan, 2010; Baumert, 2010). In addition, when looking at the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies, the German states that educate students primarily in Gesamtschulen consistently have lower scores than states with more articulated school systems (Baumert, & Köller, 1998; Köller, 2008).

The ongoing 'National Educational Panel Study' (NEPS) is comparing educational processes, competency development, and educational decision-making in all 16 states. The picture that emerges is surprisingly different from that found in other studies; on the basis of a strictly regulated differentiation (teacher decides about school type, not parent), the transition into the different educational paths was more strongly connected to achievement. The schools and classes became more homogeneous, and the achievement of students increased—and without reproducing or determining social status. These results are the same for children with and without immigrant status (Esser, 2016). Fend conducted some of the largest school system investigations in Germany with thousands of children ranging from childhood into adulthood. He provided evidence that a tiered system can be successful, particularly when key aspects such as permeability are considered (i.e., if children can move from one track to another) (Fend, 2008). Dustmann, Puhani, and Schönberg (2012) call it the 'second chance' in the German school system. Indeed, recent reports based on annually conducted educational data continue to highlight the increase in permeability (flexibility) of the school system (Anger, & Orth, 2016).

In Germany, even though there is early tracking into different schools, some consider the system flexible and open enough so that misplacements early on can be corrected and children with attributes relevant to learning can advance as appropriate (Dustman, Puhani, & Schönberg, 2012). In Germany, only 5.8% of young people leave

school without a diploma (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2016; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2017). This number may still be considered too high, but it is far lower than that in comprehensive systems such as France or even the U.S. (Ahrbeck, 2016).

Even after many empirical studies—particularly after the first PISA Study in Germany (Artelt et al., 2000)—there is no conclusive evidence, however, that the tiered education system does reproduce educational inequality or improve achievement (Esser, 2016). But what is also clear is that the comprehensive school—Gesamtschule—does not lead to higher achievement of all students, nor did it reduce educational inequality in the long term (Fend, 2008). Perhaps other factors than the school structure alone are also important to consider in achieving educational and social justice.

BEYOND SCHOOL SYSTEM STRUCTURE: THE PARAMOUNT ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AND OTHER FACTORS

Some see the primary problem of achieving educational justice in Germany less as a problem of the structure of the school system than of teaching. According to this view, too much energy has been spent on the discussion of the school system, rather than improving *instruction* in the classroom. What happens in the classroom seems to be far more important than the structure itself (Ahrbeck, 2016; Kauffman, & Badar, 2014). Thus, in his meta-analysis, Hattie has shown that the quality of lessons and teaching—and particularly the teacher herself or himself—are more important for students' educational success than is the structure of the school system (Hattie, 2013).

It seems to be most important for schools to improve *instruction and learning* for all students. Empirical studies have demonstrated that variance in achievement and effects *within* systems is larger than the variance *between* systems (Ahrbeck, 2016, 2017). The quality of the school, teaching and learning, the existence of distinct support programs (such as language learning) beginning in preschool, and early intervention for students at risk, seem to be much more effective in increasing quality and achieving educational justice than school reforms of structure (Tenorth, 2010).

There is evidence that the structure of the school system alone does not cause educational and professional advancement or disadvantage. Some studies show that primary and secondary factors related to the family of origin accounted more for post secondary achievement and career choices than a particular school structure in secondary schools (Ahrbeck, 2016, Fend, 2008). Finally, the influence of schools is limited, and schools should not be taken as sufficient to make a society more just, and their role as instruments of social engineering must not be overestimated (Kerstan, 2012).

Full inclusion, one school/one classroom for all, including all children with special needs, relies for its justification on a politically narrow interpretation of an international human rights convention (Anastasiou et al., in press). It seems to be yet another in a series of school reforms promising vast improvements, if only the structure of the system is changed. So, the results with regard to school reform in Germany may well lead, once again, to a skeptical view of the very high hopes created by a proposed systemic overhaul of structure.

A SCHOOL REFORM CALLED FULL INCLUSION

First, the facts. In 2014, 508,400 students with special needs were educated in Germany: There were 335,000 students taught in special schools and 173,400 in regular schools. Growing numbers of students with special needs are now educated in regular settings. Between 2009 and 2014, there was an increase from 19.2% to 34.1% of children with special needs being educated in regular schools. It has to be considered, though, that the proportion of children identified with special needs has also increased from 5.7% to 7.0% since 2005. Inclusive education is growing faster than the percentage of students identified as having disabilities; meanwhile, the number of students in special schools is only slightly decreasing (Kultusministerkonferenz [KMK], 2016, pp. XIV, XVI, XVIII).

At this point, Germany has no commonly accepted definition of inclusion—just as in other countries (Felder, & Schneiders, 2016; Hopmann, 2014; Imray, & Colley, 2017). An extreme position is represented by the idea that inclusion is 'indivisible', that *all* students without exception must be taught in regular classrooms. All institutional differentiation and categories of disabilities should be abolished (Hinz, Körner, & Niehoff, 2010; Jennessen, & Wagner, 2012; Sander, 2003; Wocken, 2015).

A concurrent view is more moderate. It is committed to education and support for learners and holds that their needs are the most important criterion of inclusion. Specialized and separate special education placements are not generally rejected. Instead, the goal is to provide each child with a learning environment that is appropriate for his or her needs (Hillenbrand, 2016). As seen from this perspective, investigations are required into which setting or type of education is beneficial or harmful for whom. Empirical evidence in answering this question is of fundamental importance (Hornby, 2014).

Terminology and translation problems make the debate more difficult. The term 'inclusion' was translated in the German version of the CRPD as 'integration', which has contributed to controversies as much as the term 'general education system'. Does 'general education system' in the CRPD imply a general education system with options for institutional differentiation or a comprehensive 'One School for All'? There is much to say in favor of Speck's (2014)

interpretation: a correct translation must take into account the general character of a school system. A narrow view implying a single unified system is likely a misinterpretation of the CRPD (Ellger-Rüttgardt, 2016; Hillenbrand, 2016). Those different interpretations of the meaning of the term 'inclusion', particularly with regards to education, have made the implementation of inclusion in Germany very challenging. In the following paragraphs, the problems of implementing full inclusion in Germany are analysed with respect to the CRPD and questions about the future of special schools, the nature of Germany's tiered school system, and current society.

The Implementation of the CRPD and Controversy about Special Schools

The UN-CRPD Committee (2015), a monitoring body examining progress in the implementation of the CRPD in countries that have ratified the convention, heavily criticized Germany for allegedly not complying with the rights of people with disabilities. The Body is supported by numerous German organizations, institutions, and individuals (Schumann, 2018). The argument is that according to the CRPD inclusion has been implemented only partially in German education, as can be deduced from comparisons with other countries. It is also claimed that in special education settings, children with disabilities receive instruction of inferior quality.

In a joint clarifying statement of the Federal Government of Germany and various government agencies (German Statement, 2015), the governing agencies expressed clearly, however, that Germany is not willing to follow the normative interpretation of the UN-CRPD-Treaty-Body (Eser, 2016). Instead, Germany will continue to pursue a scheme that includes institutional differentiation and special schools. A 'human rights violation,' suggested by critics, is firmly denied in this position. In its Paragraph 11, the German Statement asserts that the term 'segregation' has very strong negative connotations and that Germany disagrees with such views. The education system in Germany builds upon a natural right of parents to determine the education of their children. This is constitutional law in Germany (Artikel, 6-2) (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2012). An educational system which allows parents to choose between regular schools and special schools is thus compatible with, if not implied by, the constitution (*Grundgesetz*). The German Statement also makes it clear, that the claim of children in special schools in Germany receiving an inferior education is invalid. Special education teachers receive a very intensive and thorough academic education (German Statement, 2015, Paragraph 4). The education they receive is quantitatively and qualitatively comparable to that of *Gymnasium* teachers.

In 2010, the German Standing Committee of Ministers of Education (*Kultusministerkonferenz*: KMK), which has

participated in drafting the German Statement, stated that the convention did not imply anything about the structure of the education system of any given country (KMK, 2010, p. 4). This was affirmed by the Council of Europe (2006): educational traditions and national structures should be taken into account in the implementation of CRPD. It is thus undeniable that the UN-Treaty-Body proclaims a view of inclusion that is incompatible with that of the Council of Europe.

Speck (2016), one of the most influential special educators in Germany, supports a dual-mode inclusive system; the parallel existence of different institutional forms within a system with the goal that each child be allocated to an environment that is best for his or her development. In US terminology, this can best be described as the 'least restrictive environment' (LRE). Education should offer maximum interaction between children with and without disabilities. However, placement in general education should only get preference if it does not collide and interfere with the specific educational needs of the child concerned. Apparently, the discourse moves between what Speck (2010) has labelled "Rhetoric and Reality" (see also Anastasiou et al., in press; Hornby, 2014; Imray, & Colley, 2017).

The visionary idea of 'full inclusion', which is supposed to lead to a 'new age of education' and a 'new school' spearheading a truly inclusive society, is far from reality. At this point, a complete system of full inclusion does not exist in any country in the world (Imray, & Colley, 2017; World Health Organization, 2011). At least in Germany, teaching all children with and without disabilities together in one classroom seems to be all but impossible to implement. In Northrhine-Westphalia (NRW), the most populated German State, 90 percent of parent representatives said that they know of significant problems with the implementation of inclusion, and 89 percent said they wanted to maintain special schools (Ahrbeck, Fickler-Stang, Friedrich, & Weiland, 2015). Another survey found that most teachers support the existence of special schools (Forsa, 2015).

Criticism about the implementing full inclusion is intense and widespread. It comes from teachers, parents, researchers, organizations, and unions (Ahrbeck et al., 2015; Bertram, 2015; Felten, 2017; Winkler, 2014). Some consider inclusion a cost-saving enterprise, as a way to finally close the costly special education schools. Others view inclusion as a 'Trojan Horse', built in order to erode the public education system, suspecting that the quality of public education will decline dramatically because of chronic underfinancing so that parents who can opt out will do so, leaving very basic and inferior education for most students and decreasing educational justice. In that scenario, inclusion is seen as a neoliberal scheme that will

by no means increase social and educational justice (Giesecke, 2017; Anastasiou et al., in press).

Implementation of Full Inclusion Against the Backdrop of the Tiered School System

There is no doubt that the specific nature of the German school system is particularly challenged by the concept of full inclusion and the expected benefits of boundless heterogeneity in learning groups. As was shown above, children were historically grouped by achievement levels. That raises the question where students with severe cognitive disabilities could and should be taught in the German system of education under the obligation of inclusion.

As described in the previous section, there is much consensus now (with the exception of Bavaria) in favor of a two-tiered school system, with some type of comprehensive school existing in most States in addition to the traditional *Gymnasium*. The latter school type is particularly challenged in view of its high achievement level. An intense debate is raging about where students with severe cognitive disabilities should be educated. There is absolutely no doubt, that children with disabilities who can follow the educational standards of a *Gymnasium* should have access to it, even if that implies significant accommodations (e.g., for those students with sensory or physical impairments but not cognitive disabilities) (Deutscher Philologenverband, 2010).

Any child who cannot meet the academic standards of a *Gymnasium* would normally be rejected by a *Gymnasium*. If that child, however, had a diagnosis of a cognitive impairment, the claim of 'full inclusion' would imply that he or she *should be admitted to a Gymnasium regardless of academic achievement*. This creates an absurd situation for which there are only two possible solutions. One would be that the *Gymnasium* itself is abolished, as it is by definition exclusive, by virtue of the fact that entry is based on achievement. However, as described above, this idea of abandoning academic standards has not been politically viable in Germany, neither during the past decades nor at this time. An approach more likely to succeed is that students who can *not* meet the rigorous academic requirements of a *Gymnasium*—regardless whether they have a disability—be taught in schools that by definition offer different curricula and provide varying levels of differentiation, different graduation certificates, and a flexible pace of instruction. This approach, however, is firmly rejected by full inclusion proponents, who advocate for goal-differentiated teaching in all school types (Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte, Monitoring-Stelle BRK, 2018).

Implementation of Full Inclusion in Current Society

The former social democratic minister of education of the German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Mathias

Brodkorb (2014), wrote in the article “Warum totale Inklusion unmöglich ist” (Why total inclusion is impossible) about the contradictions that occur when the idea of full inclusion is implemented in the current society. He analyzes the educational paradoxes that occur in the tensions of ‘love and achievement’ (*‘Liebe und Leistung’*). Brodkorb recommends that schools take an independent middle position between families and the post-school societal reality. Ideally, at home, in the family, children receive unconditional love and approval. They are loved for who they are. This original state of parental- and family-based love occurs—constantly, it is to be hoped—only in the early phases of life. With time, these early influences get transformed by outside forces. The reasons for that are obvious. A capitalist society does not value people for themselves but only for their ability to work or, more dramatically, for their economic exploitability (Brodkorb, 2014). Consequently, schools have to work in two ways. First, they can not avoid confronting the paradoxes of ‘love and achievement’ and economic value. The paradoxes are immense; they could not be greater. Schools in any society have an allocation and enculturation role. Thus, they can not invent themselves, for then they would be naive and alienated from society. What seems most important for schools is maintaining a balance in a conflict-laden field—a balance between respect for each individual’s educational progress and differences in achievement, differences that inevitably result from comparing students. It seems that full inclusion proponents in Germany intend to dissolve exactly those comparisons and ignore students’ differences in achievement.

The idea of school—any school in any system, for that matter—as a place that differentiates instruction without limits is incompatible with such views. Advancement by achievement is a significant accomplishment of the age of Enlightenment, enabling millions of people to move beyond the barriers of their birth and class and move up the social ladder. In that view, the concept of “achievement” can not be eliminated from schools in achievement-based modern societies. Asking schools to ignore or eliminate academic achievement may very well leave the most vulnerable children in danger of failure *after school* because they will be unprepared to life in society.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The school system debate in Germany, the subsequent changes, and empirical studies indicate that schooling is more complex than simply including all children in a single school. As we have suggested, structural changes and reforms of Germany’s three-tiered school system beginning in the 1960s did not necessarily produce the anticipated results or fulfill the high hopes engendered. The structural changes did not solve the quest for social justice and better educational outcomes for all children. At

this point, very high expectations are connected to yet another quite expensive and intensive school reform, full inclusion, which attempts to educate all children not just in ‘one school but in ‘one classroom’. Given Germany’s experience with ambiguous results of structural school reform, the nation should thus follow a careful path, offering greater inclusion but at the same time acknowledging the limits of what is possible and desirable. The transfer of concepts from other countries to Germany must take into consideration its unique historical context (educational processes and responsibility lie within the sovereignty of the states/Bundesländer) and structure (tiered school system), not demand inclusive practices that are simply not possible.

Instead of closing all special schools and educating all children with special needs in the regular classroom with an ideology of full inclusion, there should be a thorough analysis of what works and what does not with regards to educating a child with special needs. The child and his or her needs should be at the forefront of our concern. There should be an in-depth analysis of best teaching and support strategies for that child, and decision making should be guided by how a setting should be arranged in order to realize those instructional strategies. Realistically, some settings may be unable to provide what a child needs, even after considerable effort and accommodations. Thus, different options must be available or else the quality of education the child receives will be inferior.

Many factors, such as the family of origin, the availability of early intervention, ongoing support programs in schools, and the quality of teaching potentially influence educational outcomes, and educational justice, as we have suggested in previous paragraphs. Even if it is accepted that more children with special needs need to be included in regular German schools, that alone will not create more educational justice. Preference should be given to equitable (inclusive) settings that are well supported and inspired by guidance and high expectations for all children. There are indications that children who do not get such guidance about their abilities, future options, and perspectives at home are most in need of this in their school environment. It is important to keep paths and tracks open and permeable while maintaining clearly defined standards. Some children may need separate settings either temporarily or for a long time in order to achieve the education that fits best their needs.

Above all, however, the quality of *teaching* in any setting is the most important determinant of effectiveness of education (Hattie, 2013; Kauffman, & Badar, 2014). Given its great importance, it is surprising that there is no mandatory continuing education system for teachers in Germany. Evaluations occur during teacher training and during promotions. If a teacher does not desire a promotion, they may never be evaluated in their entire career. He or she may also never again have to participate in any continuing

education course because this is optional. This state of affairs is vastly different from that in the USA, where many teachers have to be recertified through continuing education during specific time intervals. Existing instruments of quality evaluate almost exclusively the form of instruction instead of its quality. Effective instruction is particularly important for children and youth with special needs. Experience shows that educators without preparation for learners with special needs can rarely cope with the challenges of teaching such children. Satisfactory teaching and learning can only be expected if enough *trained* personnel are available.

For children attending special schools, there should always be curricular and other links to regular education, in order to make 'inclusive education' work in reality. This would mean that all children have a variety of excellent, highly permeable paths available, perhaps with different foci, but in any event learning opportunities that best fit their needs at a given time.

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